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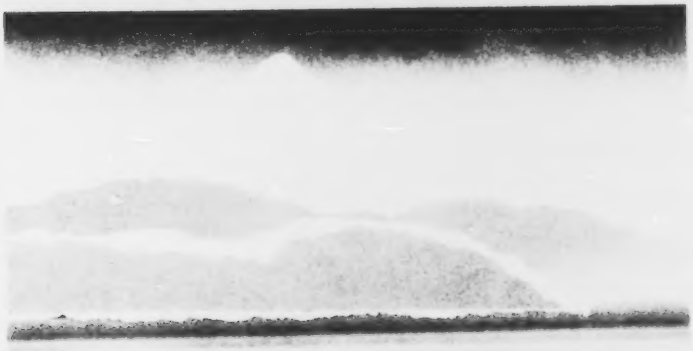

SUSTAINING THE WATER RESOURCE

BC Environment

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SUSTAINING THE WATER RESOURCE

BC Environment

We welcome your comments:

We are most interested in your thoughts on *Sustaining the Water Resource.* You can reach us in the following ways:

- By sending written comments by October 15th, 1991 to:

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- By calling the number below to provide comments.
- By participating in a group meeting where available.

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GOALS AND PRINCIPLES

B.C. ENVIRONMENT AND THE WATER MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

The general principles guiding the development of a new water management strategy for British Columbia arise from the ministry's broad objectives: to promote sustainable economic growth and prosperity within the limits of long-term ecological health, to preserve and enhance the natural world, and to meet the evolving needs of the province's resource users.

To accomplish those critical tasks, B.C. Environment is committed to taking the lead as guardian and steward of the province's environmental resources, including water.

In order to fulfill that mission, the Water Management Program is committed to comprehensive planning for the water resource and integrated management of all environmental resources. The program will focus its activities over this decade on these important goals:

- Managing the supply and use of water.
- Defining, monitoring, protecting and reporting on water quality.
- Minimizing the threat to lives and property caused by drought, flooding and erosion.
- Ensuring an adequate knowledge of the water resource.

Underlying all those commitments is the belief that public involvement in water resource decisions is to be promoted, and the belief that the requirements of present and future resource users must be acknowledged.

1

WATER MANAGEMENT IN B.C.

FROM ITS EARLY DAYS TO THE PRESENT

Water has played an essential role in the social and economic growth of British Columbia. Rivers and lakes have provided transportation routes and influenced the siting of communities. British Columbia's water has been of central importance in the establishment and expansion of many industries — including agriculture, forestry, mining, sport fishing, wildlife recreation and tourism. Moreover, the province's abundant sparkling lakes and rivers are a source of pride and pleasure for its people.

The first water use legislation in British Columbia was passed in 1859. It was a response to the needs of the day, conferring powers to grant water rights and to collect fees for water use. Since then, amendments have been made to the Water Act, and new areas of water management recognized. For example, in the late 1950s, privately owned utilities were formally recognized to provide water services for expansion and development outside municipal boundaries.

Sometimes the development of programs has involved crisis management. Such was the case in the Fraser River flooding, in 1948, which spurred the introduction of the Fraser River Flood Control Program. Similarly, the 1972 Oak Hills disaster, in Kamloops, underlined the need for new standards for construction in flood-prone areas.

Today, the Water Management Program places a new emphasis on anticipating problems and preventing them. For instance, the need for water quality assessment throughout British Columbia — as the essential first stage in maintaining high-quality water — was first recognized in the 1960s and now finds a strong commitment in the Water Management Program.

At present, the Water Management Program of B.C. Environment meets its mandate through the Water Management Division in Victoria, as well as six regional offices and three subregional offices throughout the province.

The program's mandate has five main components:

1. ***The Water Management Program is responsible for measuring the supply of surface water and groundwater throughout the province.***

   - Program staff collect water data and survey snow conditions.
   - Flood and runoff conditions are forecast.
   - Water well records are kept, and levels of groundwater are monitored.

2. ***Surface water is allocated fairly among various users. Also, program staff ensure that privately owned utilities provide their customers with good service.***

   - Under the authority of the Water Act, the Water Management Program licenses and regulates water use, and collects fees.
   - Approvals are issued for the short-term use or diversion of water.
   - Permits are issued for access to water over Crown lands.
   - The program administers water reserves and Water Users' Communities.
   - Appeals related to water use are adjudicated.
   - Privately owned water utilities are regulated under the Water Utility Act and the Utilities Commission Act.

3. ***The Water Management Program contributes to the maintenance of a high level of water quality.***

   - High quality is encouraged by setting water quality objectives.
   - Program staff monitor water quality, assess problems and provide advice on corrective measures.
   - Development proposals are assessed — to ensure the maintenance of high-quality water throughout British Columbia.
   - Monitoring and controlling Eurasian milfoil are also essential facets of the Water Management Program.

4. ***The program is involved in the comprehensive planning of water resources.***

- Program staff participate in the development of watershed management plans.
- Electricity-generating utilities and companies are monitored.
- Plans are reviewed for new and rehabilitated power plants.
- Water supply and drainage projects under the Canada/British Columbia Agri-Food Regional Development Subsidiary Agreement (to 1991) are reviewed and managed.

5. ***The Water Management Program works to minimize the trauma, loss of life, and property damage caused by flooding, erosion and drought.***

- Under the terms of the Canada/British Columbia Floodplain Mapping Agreement, the program identifies areas prone to flooding.
- Floodproofing standards are set for building construction, under the authority of the Municipal Act and the Land Title Act.
- Dykes are rehabilitated, under the Fraser River Flood Control Agreement (1966–1995), and individual properties are protected on a cost-sharing basis.
- Assistance is provided in flood emergencies.
- Large and small dams and dykes are inspected.
- Damages from drought are minimized through operation of dams for storage purposes, low-flow studies and water use regulation.

The above activities outline the Water Management Program as it exists today. The following chapters will explain the need for review and will outline new strategies for renewing the Water Management Program, its policies and legislation.

2

THE NEED FOR REVIEW

Although British Columbians are proud of having some of the finest water in Canada — indeed, in the world — there are signs that further action must be taken immediately to protect and sustain our precious resource. We must meet the important challenge of reviewing and updating our water resource policies.

One sign of stress is that water availability is constrained, and few sites are left for inexpensive and accessible water storage. Problems with water quality are becoming evident, another warning that we must review and update our water policies. Some supplies of surface water and groundwater have been contaminated.

People now recognize values in water far beyond the resource's ability to meet domestic, industrial and agricultural requirements. More and more, they are understanding the importance of instream flows for fish, for wildlife populations, for maintaining water quality, for recreation and for aesthetics. As a result, the public is paying much closer attention to the impact that projects can have on the long-term health of the province's water supply.

In addition, Native people have expressed specific concerns regarding water. Water plays an essential role in the subsistence and spiritual activities of Native communities. To First Nations people, water is "sacred."

The provincial Native Water Issues Steering Committee is compiling information on Native water licensing. Consultation with Native groups is being planned to determine Native peoples' needs and aspirations with respect to water. It is hoped that the committee, which is expected to report by May 1992, will be able to suggest solutions to some of the concerns voiced by the Native people of B.C..

Overall, water management issues have become more contentious, complex and difficult to resolve. More thorough water management is imperative, to play an assertive role in sustaining the resource and in settling water use conflicts.

There are other reasons making the need for policy review urgent. The existing Water Act is inadequate to address current and anticipated problems associated with groundwater, to name just one area. Groundwater is becoming increasingly important as supplies of surface water become fully allocated. However, although the Water Act is an effective tool for allocating surface water, its legislation regulating groundwater has not been proclaimed.

Moreover, the Water Act neglects the vital questions of water quality and watershed planning. Such deficiencies in the Water Act contribute to uncertainty about the future of that basic resource.

There are still more pressures on our water resource, highlighting the necessity of immediate policy action. For example, it is time for British Columbia to review policies covering water pricing and water export.

Those forces, coupled with the challenge of implementing sustainable development, create a pressing need for review of our water management policies.

Responding to the challenges that lie ahead will be an evolving process, based on your concerns and priorities, and on available funding. This paper is not only meant to inform you, but also to encourage your comments. We would like to know your opinions on how the province's water programs and legislation could be upgraded. We will weigh your thoughts very carefully before introducing any new legislation. The new laws will reflect your ideas about the future of British Columbia's precious resource -- clean, abundant water.

3

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

IMPLICATIONS FOR WATER MANAGEMENT

Sustainable development strikes a balance between environmental protection and economic development so that society's enduring health and prosperity are assured. Although environmentally sound economic development has always been the goal of the provincial government, resource protection and stewardship are now taking on greater significance.

The stronger emphasis on stewardship extends to all resource areas, and certainly to the province's water resource. Abundant, high-quality water — though a basic constituent of life and an essential component of most human activities and environmental processes — has often been taken for granted in British Columbia. Sometimes it has been wasted with impunity. Stewardship will prevent such waste.

The principles of sustainable development and resource stewardship have their roots in the landmark report entitled *Our Common Future,* prepared for the United Nations by the World Commission on Environment and Development in the late 1980s. The commission called for a change in the focus of economic development — from quantity to quality. Its extensive international research provided evidence that development which degrades the environment diminishes the economic vitality of communities

Our Common Future recognizes that although a healthy environment is essential to all life processes, some form of economic growth is necessary. Then, to ensure that such progress is compatible with environmental protection, the report advances the notion of "sustainable development." The term is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The Government of British Columbia is strongly committed to implementing sustainable development. That commitment, in turn, has many implications for water management policies:

1. ***Sustainable Use*** — Water must not be allocated beyond the resource's capacity to replenish itself. A good inventory of the available resource must be maintained. The use of surface supplies and groundwater must not exceed a level consistent with the sustained yield of the resource.

2. ***Protection of Ecological Systems*** — Greater emphasis must be placed on protecting the quality of the water environment, and associated aquatic ecosystems, and on enhancing and restoring them where quality has been damaged.

   Competing instream and out-of-stream uses must be weighed carefully to ensure that present and future British Columbians can meet their social, economic and environmental goals.

3. ***Comprehensive Planning System*** — Water resource decision making must be based on comprehensive planning in order to anticipate and resolve conflicts.

4. ***Public Consultation*** — The public should have access to water resource information and opportunities to participate in reaching decisions. Conflicts must be resolved as fairly and easily as possible, through the most appropriate mechanisms.

5. ***Integrated Use*** — With regard to development projects affecting water resources, we must assess the full range of economic, social and environmental costs and benefits.

6. ***Protection of Public Health and Well-being*** — Safety is a paramount consideration in overseeing our water, which means minimizing harm caused by flooding, erosion and drought.

7. ***Devolution of Responsibility*** — The appropriate decision-making role of governments at all levels must be reviewed to ensure that decisions are made expeditiously and fairly.

8. ***User Pay*** --- Users of the water resource must pay costs that reflect the more complex management of the resource.

4

ISSUES AND NEW DIRECTIONS IN WATER MANAGEMENT

If we are to sustain healthy, plentiful water for the British Columbia of tomorrow, we must develop effective ways of dealing with the pressures on the resource. In this chapter, we will consider the major challenges in water management, discussing them in order of priority.

We will also propose ***New Directions*** that would be effective in sustaining the water resource for the future. The New Directions would involve the effort and resources (in policy formation, programs and legislation) of not only the Water Management Program, but also other parts of B.C. Environment and other government agencies. However, before we begin the initiatives it is important that we receive your comments.

A. Water Export

The current policy of the provincial government is to prohibit the bulk export of water from Interior streams, and no licences have been issued to date. The government has granted licences, however, for the bottling of water from Interior streams.

Applications for the bulk export of water discharging directly into the ocean from coastal streams are considered on their individual merits. The government grants those licences for 15 years, with the possibility of extension. The water to be licensed for export must be surplus to local and provincial requirements, and the export operation must not have undesirable environmental and land use effects. An initial environmental impact assessment is required.

On March 20, 1991 the Minister of Environment announced that no further water licences for bulk export purpose would be issued until the water export policy for British Columbia was reviewed. This reserve has been extended to December 31, 1991.

A discussion paper will be prepared as part of that review. The provincial government seeks and encourages public input on the issue. Interested people are invited to submit their comments and suggestions. A separate process will be announced shortly to encourage discussion of this important policy.

B. Protecting Groundwater

A new water strategy for British Columbia must provide for regulating groundwater, the consumption of which has increased dramatically in the past few decades. In a province where the management focus has traditionally been on surface water, the use of groundwater must be made consistent with the principles of sustained yield and quality protection.

The Water Management Program keeps an inventory of groundwater supplies and operates a monitoring program. But as discussed in chapter 2 (*The Need for Review*), the Water Act does not regulate groundwater at present. Such regulation is essential because as more land is developed the same kinds of management problems occurring with surface water are threatening groundwater.

For example, unacceptable levels of nitrates and other waste have contaminated groundwater in various places throughout the province. Competition for groundwater supplies is also causing conflicts. A case in point is that large-capacity wells have reduced the yields of neighbouring wells. As well, the overuse of groundwater can deplete flows in nearby surface streams.

It must be remembered that surface and underground water are interdependent. Once they are polluted, restoration is costly and slow.

NEW DIRECTIONS

✔ ***Comprehensive management of groundwater in British Columbia would be undertaken, to complement the management of surface water:***

- In the long term, all wells would be licensed.
- As a first priority, groundwater control areas would be established where serious conflicts or resource overuse are evident. Groundwater use would be regulated in those areas.
- Well drillers would require certification.
- Drilling permits would be required for new wells, and well test data would be required.
- Standards would be established for well construction.

- Land-based activities adversely affecting the supply and quality of groundwater would be controlled.

C. Water Management, Planning and Instream Uses

The current Water Act is mainly concerned with allocating water for consumption. There are no provisions for preparing and implementing water management plans, which are truly the cornerstone in effective planning for the water resource. The existing act does not adequately accommodate the growing public interest in water conservation for environmental and cultural applications.

In the Water Act, instream uses — such as fisheries, wildlife populations, the maintenance of water quality, aquatic ecosystems, riparian habitats, recreational and cultural uses, and aesthetic values — do not enjoy the same recognition as does water consumption. Water management plans can address those concerns and appear to be the path that could be followed in protecting and enhancing the water resource. That option requires public consultation and the adoption of legislation before implementation can occur.

Water management plans are a comprehensive tool for anticipating and preventing difficulties. Carried out through local and provincial government agencies, they ensure that water use is compatible with the goals of sustainable development and integrated resource management. The plans also make sure that water is allocated for the use of highest value, and that impacts of proposed development projects on water quality and quantity are fully addressed. Water management plans provide a means for comparing development alternatives and for resolving conflicts. Moreover, resource users can make commitments to future directions through such plans.

British Columbia's rivers, lakes and streams must be managed so that the needs of water consumers are balanced with the need to maintain stream flows to meet environmental, social and recreational demands. Protecting flow levels to maintain water quality requires greater attention — in order to safeguard fisheries, wildlife, river ecosystems, and social, cultural and aboriginal values. Water management plans are the starting point for such protection.

A greater emphasis on preparing water management plans will allow for more flexibility in water allocation than has been possible in the past. Present practice is to allocate water use by licence. Precedence is generally based on the date of application for the licence, on a "first come, first served" basis. In most cases, a licensed water right belongs to the land, mine or project for which it is to be used. As long as the user meets the terms of the licence and the provisions of the Water Act, the licence stays in force and remains attached to the land, mine or project. The problem is that conditions alter and when conflicting water uses emerge they are difficult to

accommodate. Water management plans anticipate and provide mechanisms to deal with such friction and with changing resource uses.

The Water Management Program must also carry out responsibilities for water licensing in the most efficient, effective and timely manner possible. There is now a significant waiting time for water licences, and improvement is required.

NEW DIRECTIONS

✔ ***Comprehensive planning for the development and management of water resources would be emphasized.***

This New Direction could include regional plans for major basins or major power projects, and subregional plans for managing surface water and groundwater. Operational plans could also be developed to govern groups of water licence holders. The plans would complement, and be co-ordinated with, existing government planning processes.

✔ ***Plans would be tailored to unique local needs.***

Such customized plans could include data collection, analysis and monitoring of the water resource. They would assess existing and future water use for the area and accommodate social, economic and environmental considerations. Water resource protection, conservation, development and allocation would receive close study. Plan preparation would allow for public consultation and for specifying realms of involvement for governments and other agencies. Water management plans would provide a further important opportunity — setting out details of how development projects affecting the water resource would be implemented.

✔ ***Water management plans would need to be supported with effective implementation measures.***

Water licensing decisions would be made in accordance with approved plans, including changing uses and priorities, reserving water by sub-basin for certain uses. Where necessary, expropriation of licences could occur based on appropriate compensation. Public consultation and participation, co-operation by various public agencies and better methods of conflict resolution would all be encouraged. The social, economic and environmental costs and benefits associated with development projects affecting the water resource would be addressed.

✔ ***Improvements to the water licensing system would be provided.***

A computerized Water Licence Information System is being introduced at present which will decrease the waiting time for water licences.

Other improvements could include streamlined administrative procedures, assigning additional resources to the licensing process, team approaches to processing licences, and computerization of the water licence production process.

✔ ***Protection of instream flows and uses would continue to be an important consideration as part of the planning process.***

Reservation of instream flows would occur through the planning process, and those uses could be given priority in selected watershed areas. Consultation would continue, to determine the best means to recognize instream flow needs in the licensing process.

✔ ***Periodic reviews of all water management plans would be needed.***

That would allow plans to be updated and improved in terms of public acceptability, resource demand, and advances in technology and knowledge.

D. Protecting Water Quality

We must redouble our efforts to safeguard surface water and groundwater from contamination. Healthy, unpolluted water is essential to human existence and activity, and to a sustainable environment. A preventive approach to protecting the resource is an imperative, since once water is contaminated the cost of restoration is expensive — in both time and money.

The government sets water quality criteria, province-wide, to establish safe conditions for water used in various applications. It also establishes water quality objectives for specific bodies of water, taking into account naturally occurring quality and the most sensitive water use.

However, we must give even more attention to maintaining the health of B.C.'s surface water and groundwater, and its ocean. Strong and thorough protection measures are needed in the face of mounting pressures from industrial, urban and agricultural developments, which all can affect water quality. Those measures must embrace the recognition of vulnerable land areas and employ modern technology in monitoring water quality. Furthermore, the provisions must require a commitment by all parties involved in development to keep the impacts on water quality within determined limits.

NEW DIRECTIONS

- ✔ ***An integrated approach would be taken to water quality control. Such co-ordination is fundamental to B.C.'s new directions in protecting our water.***
- ✔ ***There would be a continued emphasis on the development of water quality criteria and objectives for the whole province, and on state-of-the-environment reporting on water quality.***
- ✔ ***Public participation would be encouraged in creating water use designations in the course of setting water quality objectives.***
- ✔ ***The quality criteria and objectives would be followed closely — during implementation of water management plans and in all decision-making processes, including issuing of waste management permits.***
- ✔ ***Monitoring and managing water quality would be undertaken for all operations where pollution sources are widely dispersed.***
- ✔ ***Water quality would be considered in the issuing of water licences.***

E. Water Pricing and Conservation

British Columbia's new water strategy must incorporate measures to conserve the water resource. Traditionally, water has been plentiful and cheap in our province. Recent interest in water export has increased our recognition of that good fortune. But water shortages often occur in the Okanagan Valley, the Central Interior, in parts of the Kootenay region and on the east coast of Vancouver Island. Drought can affect all but the most water-rich areas.

Undervaluing the resource has contributed to the deterioration of water quality, to overuse and to waste.

Water-pricing strategies have not been designed to promote conservation. Most water users in the province are not metered. Even where water use is metered, it is commonly sold on declining block rates: in other words, the more water utilized, the cheaper the rate.

In general, the price paid by water users does not cover the full cost of delivery, nor of treatment. Instead, the capital and operating costs of water supply and municipal wastewater disposal systems are supported by government grants, tax revenues, fixed levies, and fees based on recorded use. Those policies of nominal pricing have helped to make B.C.'s per-capita water use among the highest in Canada.

Several initiatives are possible to promote water conservation. They include restructuring price formulas, restricting use, educating the public, improving irrigation methods, setting up recycling systems in industrial plants and installing more efficient water fixtures.

Among those conservation methods, reforming the price formulas offers a wide range of potential rewards, such as the following:

- A fair return for a Crown resource.
- Essential support for maintaining and replacing sewer and water systems, and for acquiring new storage sites.
- Encouragement for water users to adopt new technology that will allow more efficient water handling.
- Price controls on demand levels, to make sure existing sewer and water systems are used to maximum efficiency.
- More control of consumption levels, to help assure a good supply of water for the future.
- Encouragement for users to get the highest possible value from their water.
- New flexibility to ensure the costs of water services are fairly distributed among users.

NEW DIRECTIONS

✓ ***Water-pricing policies and regulations would be developed that are equitable for all users. Such new policies would more accurately reflect the economic, environmental and social values of the water resource.***

✓ ***Other methods to encourage water conservation would be developed and introduced.***

✓ ***Public education on the importance of conserving British Columbia's water would receive special support in the province's new water strategy.***

F. Flood Protection

British Columbia's new water management strategy must continue to minimize damage from flooding and erosion. Serious flooding occurs frequently, and millions of dollars in compensation are paid out each year. For example, flooding in the Okanagan region, in June 1990, resulted in damages of about $18 million. In November of the same year, flooding in the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island resulted in damages of over $20 million.

The province is carrying out five protection strategies:

- In September 1987, the Minister of Environment announced new floodplain management policies that will facilitate planning and decision making at the local government level through floodplain management plans.

- On December 3, 1987, the 10-year Federal/Provincial Floodplain Mapping Agreement was signed. It provided a cost-sharing program for spending up to $5 million to produce floodplain maps.

- Protection of existing development is now being provided through cost-sharing agreements with local governments, for dyking and bank protection as part of the Flood Protection Program.

- The Water Management Program already provides standards for inspecting and maintaining both major and minor dams. However, writing more comprehensive standards into legislation will promote inspection and maintenance programs among dam licence holders.

- B.C. Environment will continue to co-operate with the Provincial Emergency Program in the development of a flood response plan.

NEW DIRECTIONS

✔ ***Improved floodplain management would be carried out by local government.***

✔ ***The government would seek continued funding for dyking and bank protection.***

✔ ***The government would develop regulations on dam and dyke safety, during the stages of design, construction, maintenance and removal.***

G. Responsibilities for Water Management

The actions discussed in the previous sections represent evolutionary change in water management. Responsibilities must change, as well. Partnership is essential between all levels of government. Data systems shared with the Federal Government can enhance the collection of information on water quantity and quality for both surface and groundwater. The new emphasis on water management planning, water quality objectives and floodplain management provides additional opportunities for local levels of government to become directly responsible for aspects of water management, based on the principles of sustainable development.

Similarly, the public will have to take a greater part in decision making. That must be accompanied by a heightened responsibility, on the part of each British Columbian, to protect the water resource.

The first step in the development of a new water management strategy for British Columbia will be your review of this discussion paper. We welcome your comments!

GLOSSARY

Alluvial Fan — A fan-shaped deposit of soil, gravel and rock debris, made when a fast-moving mountain stream enters a sloping plain or wide valley. The stream's reduction in speed leads to the deposit of a great amount of sediment. The deposit then causes the stream to split and alter its course, creating the fan-shaped accumulation of sediment.

Instream — Instream applies to water within the stream, river or lake itself. Instream uses include fisheries, the maintenance of water quality, aquatic ecosystems, riparian habitats, recreational and cultural uses, and aesthetic and spiritual values.

Integrated Resource Use — Resource management that allows for the operation of more than one resource use in the same area. Integrated resource management considers both competing and complimentary resource values in a comprehensive manner. The goal is to maximize social, environmental and economic benefits with no undue harm to any one resource sector.

Riparian Habitat— The natural dwelling place of an animal or plant — on, or in, the bank of a river, pond or small lake.

Water Quality Criteria — Levels of contaminants determined to be safe for various classes of water use.

Water Quality Objectives — Goals for concentration levels, in water, of selected contaminants, set to protect the most sensitive uses. The objectives guide waste and water management, and establish a reference against which the state of water quality at a particular site can be checked.

Water Users' Community — Any public corporate body (consisting of a group of six or more licensees) incorporated under the Water Act for the control, operation and maintenance of water works.